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SUBJECT: JERUSALEM MEDIA REACTION (8/12): Who deserves responsibility for closing the Gaza Crossings?

Main Stories:

All the dailies give front-page coverage to the closing of the Gaza crossings today by Israel. Al-Quds writes that Israeli Defense Minister Barak's decision to shut down the crossings came after a rocket landed on Sderot yesterday afternoon from northern Gaza. The decision will affect the Nahal Oz crossing, currently used to transport fuel, and the Sofa crossing, used for the passage of foodstuffs. The coverage notes that since the truce was announced on June 19, forty missiles have been fired from the Gaza Strip, but have not caused any casualties according to IDF reports.

All dailies continue to provide prominent coverage of the passing of the Palestinian national poet, Mahmoud Darwish, reporting that Palestinian Authority (PA) President Abbas will attend the funeral and that both official and community-organized ceremonies are being prepared in his honor. The papers report that the Palestinian Cabinet honored Darwish yesterday in a special mourning session during which Prime Minister Fayyad paid tribute to the poet on behalf of President Abbas. All dailies quote Fayyad as saying, "Farewell Mahmoud...through your humanity you saw the triumph of the humanity of the Palestinian people." The body is expected to arrive Wednesday, Aug 13, and will be buried at a small hill next to the Cultural Palace in Ramallah, where he held his last poetry session. A presidential delegation asked the family's permission to bury the deceased in Ramallah in accordance with his will.

The dailies report that the Israeli ministerial committee charged with the issue of releasing Palestinian prisoners decided on August 11 to release 150-200 prisoners whose hands "do not have Israeli blood on them." This decision comes after a promise made by Olmert to Abbas, during their recent peace talks, to release Palestinian prisoners.

All dailies report on the Israeli decision to transfer 72 million NIS to the Palestinian Authority to pay the salaries of its Gaza employees. Israeli Defense Minister Barak ordered the transfer in response to a request by PM Fayyad.

The dailies report on an Israeli plan to build synagogues and bridges in the Al-Maghrabi Gate, the western gate of Al Aqsa Mosque, noting that the bridge would enable the police to raid Al Aqsa at will. The Al Aqsa Association called for an emergency meeting to counter these Israeli efforts.

The dailies quote the Secretary General of the Palestinian Presidency, Tayyeb Abdel Rahim, as having said yesterday during a conference of retired veterans that "the national struggle is passing through its most critical and dangerous phases," and that the peace process is "facing many obstacles which will have dire consequences for the region."

Inside pages of all the dailies provide coverage of the internship program funded by the U.S. Consulate General in Jerusalem and implemented by the Palestinian Business Women Forum (BWF) in cooperation with the Consulate. The 17 interns who participated in the program completed 120 hours of practical training with prominent Palestinian companies throughout the West Bank. The positive coverage highlighted these efforts to integrate recent women graduates into the Palestinian workforce.

BLOCK QUOTES:

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11. Independent Al-Quds runs its main editorial entitled, "Egypt... and the Palestinian Situation" (08/12): "Rafah and the other crossings were opened per international arrangements and agreement, and what actually closed them down is the takeover by force of the authority in Gaza and the continuity of these practices as witnessed in recent events; added to this is the rejection and hindrance of the dialogue initiative launched by President Abu Mazen which would have led to the reopening of all the crossings. It would have been better for those [an ambiguous reference to Hamas in Gaza] who criticize Egypt and raise suspicions about its positions, to first demand from Israel, with whom they concluded a truce...that the crossings be opened. And it would have been better for those same individuals to go back and examine the causes [of the closures] rather than stepping over the real facts. The only way of lifting the siege in the Gaza strip is to restore the unity of the homeland and unify the PNA and the security forces ... The Egyptian position has always been and still is crystal clear in this regard and has been repeatedly emphasized ... Egypt's national position in support of and solidarity with Palestinian rights remain above all suspicions and accusations."

12. Under the title, "Hamas and Egypt", regular columnist Hani Al Masri opines in the independent Al-Ayyam (08/12): "These days, signs of a new crisis between Egypt and Hamas appear as Egypt blocks passage of a parliamentary delegation through Rafah, and as official Egyptian sources leak growing skepticism about Hamas' credibility and interest in reconciliation and dialogue, especially after recent events following the Gaza beach [explosion]... Signs of this crisis have become even clearer in the accelerating criticism that Hamas has fired at Egypt for not opening the Rafah crossing, to the point where Hamas leaders have organized and taken the lead in marches towards the crossing. This threatens a repetition of the popular large-scale raid of the Egyptian-Gazan border, which would embarrass the Egyptian leadership and make them party to the siege ... An explosion of the Hamas and Egypt crisis is in nobody's interest because it would reflect on the whole Palestinian people and on the Palestinian cause, and most powerfully on the people in the Gaza Strip. We must hurry to stop the deterioration [of the situation] and give priority to ending the division and to restoring unity."

WALLES